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THE GAON, R. ELIJAH WILNA

Address delivered in commemoration
of the Two Hundredth Anniversary
of his birth

by

LOUIS GINZBERG

at the

Jewish Theological Seminary of America



New York

1920

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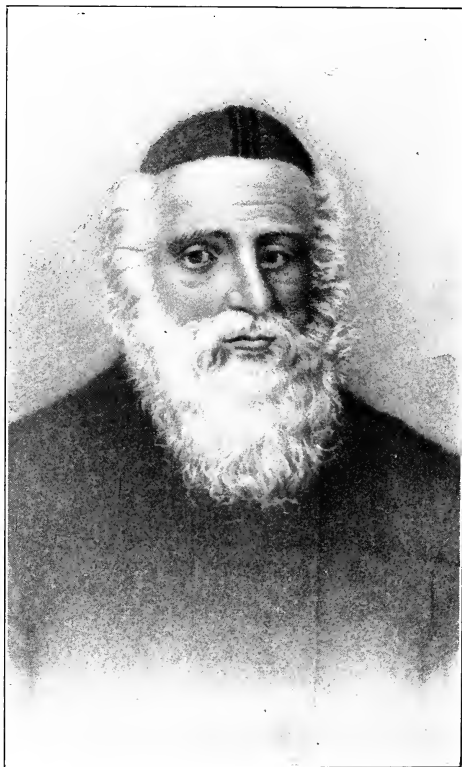
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New York

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R. ELIJAH WILNA
(Courtesy of Samuel Wilner, Esq.)

We are assembled here tonight to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Gaon, R. Elijah Wilna. We wish to do honor to the memory of the scholar with whom a new epoch began in the study of Rabbinic literature, to pay our tribute of admiration to the last great theologian of classical Rabbinism and to draw inspiration from the contemplation of the life of a saint, a life of most rare spiritual depth.

R. Elijah Wilna, called the Gaon par excellence, came of a family celebrated for the learning and piety of its members. Students of heredity might find it highly interesting to study the stock from which the Gaon sprang and to ascertain what it contributed to the extraordinary qualities of his soul and intellect. I shall refer to but one of his ancestors, Rabbi Moses ben David Ashkenazi, around whom a large cycle of legends arose that are told by Lithuanian Jews to this very day and were told to the young Elijah as he in turn told them to his children.

Rabbi Moses was a small shopkeeper and when appointed Chief Rabbi of Wilna about 1670 he

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refused to accept any remuneration from the community, being satisfied to eke out a living from his shop, and hence he became known as Rabbi Moses Kraemer, that is, "the shopkeeper, merchant." The members of the community thought that the least they could do for their beloved Rabbi was to patronize his shop. However, when he noticed an unexpected increase in business he insisted that his wife, who of course, was managing the shop, should keep a careful record of the profits and as soon as she had enough for her weekly expenses, should close the shop for the rest of the week. "It would be," he said, "unfair competition on my part to take advantage of my being a Rabbi." That such a poor business man should have received the epithet "Kraemer" (merchant) is a fine paradox.

Rabbi Moses Kraemer was, according to the testimony of his contemporaries, one of the greatest Talmudists of his time. Nothing, however, is known of his literary activity. Characteristic of the man is the witty remark made by him in reply to people who criticized him because he attempted to change an old established custom; he said: "The words of Scripture *al tifnu el ha-obot* is usually translated, "Seek not after the wizards," but it might also be rendered, "Seek not after the ancestors"—a play on the words *abot*

“ancestors” and *obot* “wizards”; Scripture thus teaches us that one must use his own judgment as to what is right or wrong and not exclusively depend upon custom established by ancestors. This remark reminds one of his great descendant, the Gaon, whose principle was, use your own eyes and not the spectacles of others. R. Moses Kraemer’s son, R. Elijah, was one of the leaders of the Wilna Community distinguished for his learning and piety. He was known as R. Elijah “the Saint” at a time when the Jews were still very chary of epithets of this kind. His grandson was R. Solomon, described in a contemporary document as one whose profession is the study of the Torah and—one is almost inclined to say hence—living in straitened circumstances. R. Solomon and his wife, Treine, lived in Seltz, a small town near Brest, Lithuania.

On the first day of Passover of the year 5480, that is April 23, 1720, there was born unto them a boy, their first child, whom they called Elijah, after his great grandfather, R. Elijah the Saint. The child had an unusually beautiful face, “as beautiful as an angel” are the words of his biographers, and to see him was to worship him. When the child grew older people marvelled no less at the lad’s beautiful soul and his

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mental gifts than they did at the infant's angelic beauty. Even if we discount heavily the stories told about the Gaon's youth, there can be no doubt that he was a real prodigy. At the age of six he was advanced enough in his studies of the Bible and the Talmud to dispense with the assistance of a teacher. When six and a half years old he delivered in the great Synagogue of Wilna a learned discourse taught him by his father. Put to test by the Chief Rabbi of Wilna, the lad showed that he possessed knowledge and acumen that would have enabled him to deliver such a discourse without the assistance of others.

Lively feeling and clear thinking play into each other's hands much oftener than is commonly supposed. The combination of mysticism and criticism, of which the Gaon is the best example, was inherent in his nature and discernible no less in the young child than in the ripe man. The tussle of the dialectic athletes—*Fechterschule der dialektischen Athleten*—as Heine calls the Halakah, attracted the phenomenal mentality of the young child and his imagination was nourished with the delicious fruits of the Haggadah. "A garden," to quote Heine again, "most fantastic, comparable to that planted by the great Semiramis, that eighth wonder of the world." The Haggadah of the Talmud led him to the mystic

literature and we have the Gaon's own words to the effect that he had studied and mastered this branch of literature before he was thirteen. Notwithstanding these occasional flights into the air, he remained on solid ground. His main studies centered about the Talmud and his mathematical genius led him early to recognize the deep truth that to understand a literature dealing with life, one must consider facts and facts only. He studied at a very tender age, mathematics, astronomy and anatomy. He even contemplated taking up the study of medicine but was prevented from doing so by his father, who apprehended that as a physician his son would not be able to give all his time to the study of the Torah, since it is the physician's duty to assist suffering humanity. The study of botany he was forced to abandon because he could not stand the uncouth life of the Lithuanian farmers from whom he attempted to acquire the knowledge of plants. It was a principle of his that to understand the Torah, one must be well versed in secular knowledge, and he tried to live up to it. One may state with certainty that he was in possession of all the knowledge he could derive from Hebrew sources. However, not satisfied with these materials, he encouraged the translation of Euclid into the Hebrew language and what is still more

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characteristic of his wide vision, he wished to see the works of Josephus made accessible to Hebrew readers that they might be helped by them in their study of the Talmud.

The sphere of the scholar is circumscribed by the walls of his study and the realm of the saint is limited to his soul. The outer life of the scholar and saint is briefly told. He married early, in accordance with the rule laid down in the Mishna, "At eighteen the age is reached for marriage." His wife was Hannah, the daughter of a certain R. Judah from the town of Kaidan and it is said that for a time the Gaon lived in this town, returning to Wilna at the age of twenty-five. A document of the year 1750 informs us that R. Elijah the Saint was granted a small weekly allowance from the legacy left by his ancestor, R. Moses Rivke's for the maintenance of those of his descendents who would devote themselves to the study of the Torah.

Though living in complete retirement, his fame spread rapidly. When comparatively a young man, thirty-five years old, he was approached by the greatest Talmudist of the day, R. Jonathan Eibenschuetz, to state his position with regard to the controversy that was then raging among the Jews of Germany and Poland. I have no intention to enter even into a brief ac-

count of the controversy between Eibenschuetz and his cantankerous opponent, Emden. The interest of the student of history ought to be in the flower which history puts forth and not in the muck in which it grew. For our purpose it will suffice to quote a part of the Gaon's reply to Eibenschuetz; he writes: "Oh, that I had wings like a dove, then would I fly to restore peace and quench the strange fire, that fire of contention. But who am I that people should listen to me! If the words of the Rabbis, the heads of the holy congregations are not listened to, who would care about the opinions of a young man hidden in his study?"

A few years later, at the age of forty, the Gaon seems to have partly given up his seclusion and though refusing up to the end of his life to accept the position of Rabbi, for all practical purposes he became the spiritual head not only of the community of Wilna but also of the entire Lithuanian and Russian Jewry. He changed his mode of life in compliance with the injunction of the old sages that one's first forty years should be devoted exclusively to acquire knowledge and the following to impart it. The first step in his changed attitude towards the public was the establishment of a model Synagogue. The changes introduced by him as, for instance, the abolishing of a goodly part of the Piyyut and the introduc-

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ing of congregational singing, were certainly intended to give decorum to the service and intensify the devotion of the worshippers. The Synagogue served at the same time as a house of study where a select number of prominent scholars sat at the feet of the Gaon, and though they were a handful only, they succeeded in having the influence of the master spread far and near. Especially the community of Wilna, the metropolis of Lithuania, felt such reverence for the Gaon that a word of his sufficed to undo the most solemn resolutions of a powerful board of Parnasim. When, for instance, the Board of Jewish Charities in Wilna in a fit of efficiency decreed that no one should be permitted to solicit contributions, all of which should go directly to a central body, the Gaon was of the opinion that philanthropy must never lose all sense of humanity. This would be the case if all the needy would be made to apply in person to the administration of charities. He therefore not only annulled the decision of the Board, but made the latter put at his disposal a certain sum of money to be distributed by him to those who in his opinion ought to be spared the humiliation of appearing before the officers of the community.

The incident which more than anything else brought the name of the Gaon before the great

The Gaon, R. Elijah Wilna

masses of Jewry, not only of Lithuania and Russia but also of Poland and other countries, was his bitter fight against Chassidism. That the rush of the flood of Chassidism stopped at the gates of Wilna and that even in the countries like Galicia and Poland, the large communities, the seats of Jewish intelligence were not swept away by this flood, is mainly due to the Gaon. The Gaon issued his decree of excommunication against the Chassidim on the night following the Day of Atonement of the year 1796. On the eve of the next Day of Atonement he became very ill and died a few days later, on the third day of the Feast of Tabernacles, October 17, 1797, at the age of 77 years and six months. The Feast of Joy was turned into days of mourning for the community of Wilna, for they felt that their greatest intellectual and spiritual light had been put out.

R. Abraham Danzig in his funeral oration over the Gaon speaks of seventy books composed by the latter, and the same statement is made by R. Israel of Minsk, a disciple of the Gaon. He, who had the opportunity to examine the exhibition, of the works of the Gaon, arranged by the Jewish Theological Seminary, will not consider this statement exaggerated, especially if he considers that many a work of the Gaon is still

awaiting publication and that not a few have been lost. Yet it may well be said of the Gaon that he was too fond of reading books to care to write them. He was, to use a happy phrase of Doctor Schechter, *Der ewige student* (the perpetual student) who read and studied in order that he might become a better and a wiser man. It is quite certain that all the works of the Gaon were written before he was forty, in his so-called student years, when for his own use and benefit he annotated and commented on nearly all the books he read. Some of the works ascribed to the Gaon were really composed by his disciples who put into writing the lectures and remarks of the master, and are therefore to be used with great care. No teacher would like to be held responsible for the lecture notes of his students—even of the best of them.

To one concerned in the study of Jewish mentality the works of the Gaon will furnish very interesting material. They consist of commentaries on nearly all the books of the Bible, treatises on Biblical geography, chronology and archaeology; commentaries on the Mishna and Talmud of Jerusalem, critical notes and annotations to the Tannaitic Midrashim, the Mekilta, Sifra and Sifre, as well as to the Babylonian Talmud; commentaries and notes on the classical works

of the mystic literature like the *Sefer Yezirah* and *Zohar*, treatises on astronomy, trigonometry, algebra, a grammar of the Hebrew language and, last but not least, his most important work, the commentary on the *Shulhan Aruk*.

I have no intention of following the example of those who try to exhaust a subject and end by exhausting their listeners. To give an adequate estimate of the Gaon's phenomenal mentality and his lasting contribution to the different branches of Jewish learning would require more than a dozen lectures. Tonight I shall attempt only to make it clear to you wherein the originality of this great man consisted.

Most of the biographers of the Gaon maintain that his importance consisted in having abolished, or to be accurate, in attempting to abolish, the dialectical method of studying the *Talmud*, the *Pilpul*. However, one must not overlook the fact that the *Talmud* in its main contents is a structure of dialectics. One might as well study calculus without applying the mathematical laws of equation as the *Talmud* without using dialectics. It is true the Gaon had only words of scorn for those who build the roof before laying the foundation of the structure, but the study of the *Talmud* was as little for him as for his predecessors a matter of a purely archaeological-historical

nature, having no bearing upon life. The development of Talmudic law in all its departments but especially in the domain of civil law would have been an impossibility without the application of dialectics and the Gaon was the last one to decry its importance and justification.

Of course, there are dialectics and dialectics, legitimate use and pernicious abuse thereof. Many a great Talmudist before the Gaon saw the evil of unbridled dialectics, but none of them recognized its cause and hence they were unable to remedy it. The originality of the Gaon consists in having not only diagnosed the disease but in having also established its cause and found its remedy.

Book infallibility without authoritative interpretation is no better than a mighty sword without a mighty hand to wield it. It hangs on the wall as a glorious memory; it cannot do its work. In the long run the rule of thumb infallibility will not serve. The dogma of book infallibility, if it is to play an efficient and enduring part in history, must have an authoritative body to translate it into law. The infallibility of the Bible necessitated during the second commonwealth the authority of the Sanhedrin, the legitimate heirs of which were the Patriarchate in Palestine and the Academies in Babylonia. The

conception of the Talmud as being infallible arose in a time when the Babylonian Geonim possessed a practical monopoly of spiritual prestige. With the extinction of the Gaonate about the middle of the 11th century the last authoritative body disappeared from among the Jews. The great danger confronting the spiritual life of the Jews in the Middle Ages, was about the continuity of Jewish tradition, or in other words, how to maintain the authority of the Talmud without an authoritative interpretation and the result was the endless multiplicity of authorities. The views of every competent scholar, especially if they were written down, came to be considered authoritative. Multiplicity of authority, however, is identical with no authority and hence the rise of the Pilpul by means of which the differences among the authorities were as far as possible explained away.

Now, dialectics is a system whereby the interpreter can first put into a text any given set of ideas and then with a grand air of authority take them out of the text. Under the hand of a bold dialectical method the text of the Talmud lay helpless. To use blunt speech, it was no better than a wax nose. The interpreter could shape and twist it as he pleased. The attempt to maintain the authority of the Talmud by upholding

the authority of all its interpreters by means of dialectics could not but lead to exegetical abuse of the worse kind and in the long run it endangered the very authority which the Pilpul wished to safeguard, the authority of the Talmud. The tacit proviso was that dialectics must keep within the bounds marked out by authority. But the leopard does not change his spots when he is put within a cage. It is true, behind the commentators of the Talmud and codifiers, stood the Talmud, but it stood behind them and could not be reached save through them.

After these preliminary remarks we may be in a better position to understand the originality of the Gaon, the father of criticism of the Talmud. The first condition of criticism is the emancipation from tradition and the Gaon was bold enough to declare that the interpretation of the Talmud must be based on reason and not on authority. Yet the Gaon did not belong to those whose motto was, to quote a witty Frenchman, *Les grands pères ont toujours tort*, or in homely English, "Whatever was good enough for our fathers is not good enough for us." His admiration and reverence for the post-Talmudic scholars was boundless, but to use his own words, "No personal regard where truth is involved." The obligation of criticism for him was composed of

two elements, the element of religious conscience and the element of reason. If the Talmud is the great treasure of the Synagogue then it is an act of conscience to bring it forth from behind tradition into direct touch with everybody. Again, if conscience insists upon a first hand knowledge of the Talmud for the sake of the man who needs it for his guidance in life, reason insists upon the same thing for the sake of the object to be known. For the scientific mind guarantees to every object, great and small, to be seen as it is.

With the shaking off of the yoke of authoritative interpretations, the critical principle was conceived. But it might have taken centuries before it came clearly to the light. Criticism was a lost art for the last centuries of antiquity and the entire Middle Ages and was rediscovered in comparatively modern times. The genius of the Gaon, however, was so great that he not only conceived the critical principle but also showed the way it should be applied. Living as he did in an isolated world without being in the least influenced by the spirit of the eighteenth century, he nevertheless evolved the essential canons of criticism which took the best minds of several centuries to arrive at.

The contribution of the Gaon to external and internal criticism of the Talmud—for obvious

reasons I prefer these terms to those commonly used, "lower and higher,"—are numerous and of lasting value. He was the first Jewish scholar to see clearly that ancient documents, copied and re-copied as they have been for centuries with very little care and exposed at every fresh transcription to new risk of alteration, would reach us full of inaccuracies. He, therefore, before using a written source set about to find out whether its text was sound, that is, in as close agreement as possible with the original manuscript of the author and when the text was found to be corrupt to emend it. Many a law, many a view of the later authorities was thus shown by the Gaon to have been based on passages of the Talmud corrupted in transmission and they collapsed as soon as the true readings were discovered or restored. It would be easy to fill pages with lists of happy emendations by the Gaon. One may say without exaggeration that a great part of the Tannaitic literature would have remained words of a "writing that is sealed" if not for the ingenious emendations of the Gaon. No one up to our day has equalled him in the art of conjectural emendations.

External criticism, however, is only a means to an end, leading to internal criticism which deals with interpretation and examines the accuracy

of authors thus enabling us to gain a profound insight into past ages. The Gaon was no less the founder of internal criticism of the Talmud than of external. Plato comparing the teaching power of a book with that of a living teacher declared that the book is self-helpless at the mercy of the reader. The truth of the statement is best seen by the lot that befell the books of Plato himself. Students have misread them, carrying into them their own wisdom and ignorance, making Plato speak a language widely different from his own. The same may be said of the Talmud. So long as the Talmudic scholars studied the Talmud only they could not help misunderstanding it. The Talmud, or to be accurate, the Babylonian Talmud, is only a part of a very vast literature and a knowledge of the whole is indispensable for the understanding of the part. The Gaon did not limit his studies to the Babylonian Talmud but extended them over the entire field of cognate literature, to the Tannaitic sources that form the basis of this Talmud as well as to the Yerushalmi, its twin brother. Accordingly, the Gaon had historical-critical problems to solve. So long as the old form of Talmud studies reigned there could be no critical problems connected with the Talmud because the real facts in the case could not force themselves into notice. For the Gaon, how-

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ever, it became necessary to ask for an explanation of the striking likeness between the Mishna and the Tosefta or between the Babli and the Yerushalmi and their almost equally striking diversity. Following his healthy instinct for facing facts boldly he could not but come to the conclusion that as the interpretation of the Talmud must be independent of post-Talmudic authorities, so must the interpretation of the pre-Talmudic literature be independent of the authority of the Talmud.

In the opening words of this address I described the Gaon as the last great theologian of classical Rabbinism. Leibnitz somewhere said of Kepler that he was not aware of his own great riches. We may apply the same characteristics to the Gaon. He did not give us a systematic representation of his theology. He was very likely not aware of having a system of theology, and yet it would not be a very difficult task to cull from his works the material necessary for a Rabbinic theology. And he was the last great theologian of classical Rabbinism. The classical ages of religion are either the periods of great beginnings, when with all the power of originality it attracts all forces and all interests to itself, or the great organizing periods when all existing culture is cast or bent into obedience to the high-

est religious ideas. In these classical ages great unity, or at any rate great harmony prevails in the spiritual world. Judaism enjoyed such a golden age during Biblical times and again later during the Middle Ages when religion was all in all in the spiritual sphere. The Jewish Middle Ages, as Zunz so aptly remarked, lasted to the beginning of the eighteenth century and hence the Gaon may well be described as the last theologian of classical Rabbinism. Though living many centuries after the great exponents of the religious philosophy of the Jews, Saadya Gaon, Gabirol, Maimonides, Gersonides, and many others, he nevertheless is a better representative of Rabbinism than they. He among all the theologians of classical Rabbinism is the least influenced by foreign thought, by Greek-Arabic philosophy, and his theology has therefore a claim to be considered Rabbinic and nothing else.

The central thought of his theology is that self-perfection or to use his own words, the perfection of one's character is the essence of religion, and that the Torah is the medium and the only one through which its task can be achieved. "The Torah," I give his words literally, "is to the soul of man what rain is to the soil; rain makes any seed put into the soil grow, producing nourishing as well as poisonous plants. The Torah also

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helps him who is striving at self-perfection but increases the impurity of the heart of those that remain uncultivated." Self-perfection cannot be achieved without hard training and hence there is a strong current of asceticism in the Gaon's theology. But it ought to be pointed out that his asceticism is essentially of a different nature from that taught by the predominating religion of the Middle Ages. He does not see in the material world the seat of evil; he even does not teach to despise the enjoyment of this world. What he maintained is that asceticism is a necessary means to self-perfection. Men's wishes must be purified and idealized but not done away with. In the severe struggle between the ideal world and the material world it is the Torah and its commandments that give man the weapons which if used properly assure him victory. I have quoted these few theological remarks of the Gaon because they throw light upon the fundamental principles of Rabbinic Judaism. It may be said of the Gaon's theology that the old became new, appropriated and applied by a great original mind.

Torah, of course, means for the Gaon as for any Jewish theologian, the written word and the unwritten tradition. The Gaon, however, more than any Jewish theologian before him, strained

the claim for the binding power of the Talmud, the depository of the unwritten Torah, to the utmost. Hucksters in history point to this as a proof of the reactionary tendency of the Gaon's theology. They fail to see that the authority, almost infallibility of the Talmud, was set up by him as a bulwark against the authority claimed for many of the post-Talmudic codifiers and interpreters. The Gaon's directions to his disciples was "Do not regard the views of the Shulhan Aruk binding if you think that they are not in agreement with those of the Talmud." In this statement the novel feature is the denial of the authority of the Shulhan Aruk and not the emphasis laid upon the authority of the Talmud, which was never questioned by Rabbinic Jews.

The earliest documents in which the Gaon is mentioned, one dating from a time when he was thirty, the other from a time when he was thirty-five, call him Rabbi Elijah the Saint, and to this day his Synagogue in Wilna is known as the Synagogue of the Saint, the *chosid's klaus*. It is true the Gaon strongly protested against the epithet "Saint" being conferred upon him, maintaining that he, as it is the duty of a Jew, attempted to live in accordance with the Torah, whereas he only should be called "Saint" who

does something which exceeds that which is ordinarily expected of man. However, the greatness of the Gaon rests on the wonderful concentration with which he gathered up all the most significant elements in Rabbinic Judaism and the inwardness and depth with which he realized the thought of preceding ages, and on the magnetism with which his personality was invested and which streamed forth from him to others. The last great representative of classical Rabbinism is the most classic type of the man in whom deep inner experiences, energetic thought and absolute faith in authority united in a most close and characteristic union. The ideals of Rabbinic Judaism thus became realized in him.

There was a certain kind of spiritual chasteness in him which made it impossible for him to pull out his innermost treasures even for his own inspection, still less for the inspection of others. For, under inspection the stamp of inwardness is apt to perish. We must be silent on our own internal life or it may cease to be internal. Accordingly, the Gaon was extremely reticent about his inner experiences and it is therefore very difficult to get a clear conception of them. Their main feature is that in the study of the Torah and the fulfillment of its commandments, he experienced the prophetic fervor, the joy and the

inspiration of personal communion with God as well as the high privilege of serving Him. The service of God was everything to him, so that he used to say, "Elijah can serve God without any rewards," the joy of serving Him was sufficient reward in itself. Notwithstanding his austerity and asceticism, he never experienced a depressed or sad state of mind. He always was, as we are informed by his biographers, in a joyful mood and in high spirits, though his trials were not few. For several years he and his family had to suffer actual hunger and other privations due to the dishonesty of a petty official of the community who kept for himself the weekly allowances granted to the Gaon from a legacy administered by the community. The Gaon preferred to suffer rather than to inform the authorities of the dishonesty of the official, being of the opinion that according to the Torah, it was his duty to suffer silently. He argued, that putting a man to shame is declared in the Talmud to be equal to bloodshed, and, of course, one must not cause bloodshed even to save one's life. He was not at all conscious of the heroic element in his suffering but believed that he only did his duty and he enjoyed his suffering as a service to God. He often sold all his furniture to assist the poor or gave away his last meal. He did it joyfully, holding that a man's

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duty is always proportionate to his capacity, and he quoted the Talmud to show that in ethics there must always be progressive taxation.

In these days when the harrowing catastrophe that came over the Jewry of Eastern Europe makes one almost despair about a better future, it is a source of consolation to contemplate the life and works, the intellect and character of the Gaon. Lithuanian Jewry, especially, may on this day of the bi-centenary of its greatest son, draw new hopes and aspirations. A dried up tree cannot bring forth delicious fruit; and if the fruit be good then the tree must be good, too. The vitality of Rabbinic Judaism is clearly proved by the production of such an intellectual giant and great soul as the Gaon and in this sense the words of Scriptures become true, "The memory of the righteous shall be for a blessing."

THE EXHIBITION

On the occasion of the bi-centenary of the Gaon, R. Elijah Wilna, an exhibition was arranged by the Librarian, Doctor Alexander Marx, of the works of the Gaon and those relating to him. The exhibition was opened to the public during the week of April 11-17 and was visited by many scholars and laymen.

It contained all the works of the Gaon in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and nearly all of them in first editions. It thus included probably the largest collection of this kind since even the British Museum lacks about twenty-five items found in the Seminary Library.

That an adequate history of the life and the works of the Gaon has not yet been written is partly due to the fact that the raw material for such a work is scattered among a hundred of volumes which have never before been brought together.

The first editions of the works of the Gaon are important not only to the bibliographer, but far more so to the historian. The very valuable bibliographical notes on the Gaon by his sons

and disciples found in the introductions of the first editions of his works, were not reprinted in the later editions. To mention only one example, the first edition of the Gaon's commentary on the Pentateuch published by his son-in-law, R. Phoebus ben Solomon (Dubrowna, 1804), has an introduction by the Gaon's sons which contains very valuable material for his life. This edition, however, is very rare and with few exceptions remained unknown to the biographers of the Gaon. The Seminary Library possesses a fine copy of this work to which is attached a letter in manuscript by the Polish community of Safed to a certain R. Solomon to whom they presented this commentary of the Gaon. It is not certain who this R. Solomon was; but there is good reason to assume that the letter to him was written by the disciple of the Gaon, R. Israel of Safed, and the author of *Taklin Hadetin*.

The Exhibition also included most of the works of the scholars who belonged to the "circle of the Gaon" and who often refer to his remarks conveyed to them orally. The little tract *Gebii Gebia Ha-Kesef* (Sklow, 1804), for instance, gives one of the most fundamental theories of the Gaon on the criticism of the Mishna. The author of the tract is not given on the title-page but it is quite certain that it came from the pen of R. Benjamin

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of Sklow, a disciple of the Gaon.

There were shown also several MSS. of the Gaon. Of special interest is a volume of *Collectanea* which was written partly by the Gaon's son, R. Solomon Zalman, who died in the life-time of his father, (see introduction to *Biure Ha-GRA on Shulhan Aruk Orach Hayyim*), at the dictation of the latter. On folio 70b of this MS. are found the following two lines:

אלה המצות הם באשר ה' אלהינו אלהינו ואלה המצות הם באשר ה' אלהינו אלהינו
אלה המצות הם באשר ה' אלהינו אלהינו ואלה המצות הם באשר ה' אלהינו אלהינו

Beneath them a disciple of the Gaon remarks to the effect that these two lines were written by "our master and teacher R. Elijah Wilna." The two lines in the Gaon's own handwriting are identical with those found in his commentary on Deuteronomy 32, 1.





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